



AVANI CLARE

Darkness Before Dawn Book 1

A VIKING'S
CURSE

A Beauty and the Beast Story



The Viking's Curse
Book 1
Darkest Before Dawn Series
By Avani Clare

Inspired by the Tale of the
Beauty and the Beast

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Description



Are you in the mood for a romance that's unlike any other?

Darkest Before Dawn is a compelling new series about two strong-willed characters from opposing worlds.

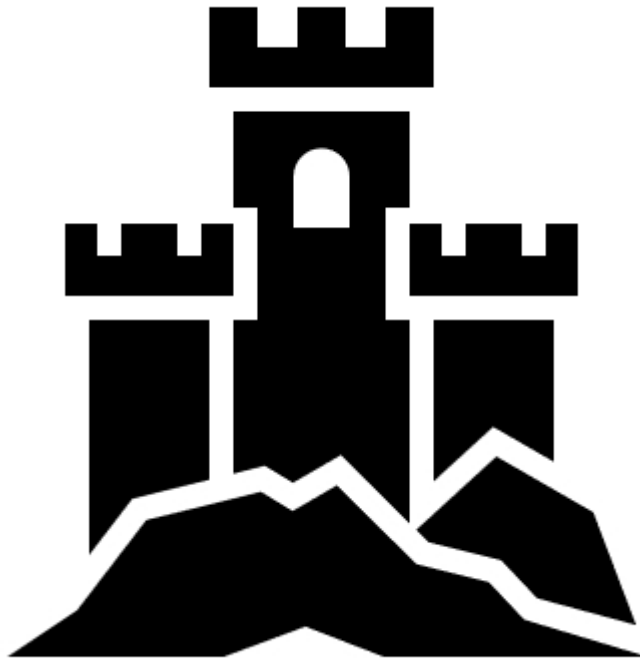
Introducing Eric Algar, a Viking commander under a cruel Elven spell, who must attract the pure love of a lady by winter's end. But who would love a man who looks like a monster and has a reputation to match his looks?

Meet Catelyn Hastings, a spirited English soldier who has made it her life's goal to bring peace to her war-ravaged land by fighting the cruel Viking invaders and drive them from her land.

And so when Cate's father, the Baron of Ermington and a trusted ally of King Alfred, disappears near the castle of the infamous Viking Commander, Catelyn knows she has no choice but to confront him.

Eric and Cate's worlds are about to come crashing together in an explosive tale of action, adventure, and swoon-worthy romance.

Prequel



The ***Darkest Before Dawn*** series has a prequel you can download for free. Subscribe to Avani News to read the Prequel "The Curse of Eric Algar," receive announcements of new releases, sneak peeks of future chapters, and more!

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Chapter One

Three Weeks After The Cursing, Spring 875, AD

It was a beautiful day to steal some horses. Eric would have preferred a day with more breeze, but anything was better than staying home with his memories. He gingerly twisted his torso and still felt the impression of the powerful feet that had kicked his ribs. His cuts and bruises were healing, but his memories were a different story.

All day and all night, he remembered, as the Elves did, the day when he, Eric Algar, murdered their families. He closed his eyes and hung his head.

The air was hot and dry, and Eric wiped his brow, trying with all his might to stay cool.

Around the Norsemen, the air smelled of danger and the possibility of violence. He could smell the grapes on the vines in the distance. He was sharply aware of the ground, the thick, springy grass, the way the hum of insects rose in pitch with the breeze.

The wind ruffled his hair, and Eric sighed as he felt the breeze flow over his scalp.

It felt wonderful to be alive, and he took in a deep breath and let it out, feeling it as it left his lungs.

He looked at his fellow horse thieves. Like him, they were all Norsemen and Danes, who had journeyed from the freezing cold of their northern lands to the more hospitable climate of this place called England.

And they liked nothing better than to cause trouble for the English and grab what wasn't theirs. Today, it was horses.

Under the command of a Norse leader, Karl Thorson, the Norsemen had stalked the English troopers and their horses to the grape-growing hamlet of Derry. They watched as the town women gave their enemies a good meal, and they heard the English exclaiming their appreciation for the food.

The Norsemen were not as fortunate as their English counterparts, and Eric heard a few of their boys complaining. He, too, was hungry after having to miss breakfast when Karl had roused them to follow the English men. They had left too quickly to eat anything.

But he was not an active participant in the Norsemen's little thieving jaunts. Eric was a commercial businessman who had journeyed to other lands to trade since he joined a seafaring Dane when he was thirteen. And now, fifteen years later, he had had enough of the sea.

He recently arrived in East Anglia, close to King Guthrum, who had given him his first longboat. Guthrum said it was an excellent place to set down roots, maybe start a family, a community. And so he traded one last thing, his ship, for a large homestead with a small castle where he brought all his shipmates to live and work.

So, no. Thievery was not Eric's favored past-time. He just had to keep busy to stop thinking and feeling and perhaps put as much distance between himself and the cause of his wretchedness.

So here they were, Eric and his fellow Norsemen waited patiently, hidden from the English troops and the people of the hamlet.

Karl, their leader, was peering through a thicket.

"I'm counting twenty-three Englishmen, more or less. Only five are in soldier attire, armed with swords and spears. The rest of the men look like civilian recruits or volunteers, and they only have wood staffs, and knives tucked into belts."

"Wood staffs?" Bo, an experienced fighter, said happily. "Those will be kindling for our swords."

"Remember, men," Karl admonished. "We're not here to kill anyone. We just want the horses."

Finally, the English finished their happy repast, and now, the English were doing what Karl had hoped they would do. The soldiers and civilian recruits, bellies filled and sleepy, were now lounging in the shade of several poplars, and many of them had fallen asleep.

After studying the troopers and satisfied they wouldn't give them too much trouble, Eric focused on the horses. These were what they were after, prime healthy horseflesh. Twenty horses, their reins attached to sturdy branches of bushes, were, luckily for the Norsemen, some five hundred meters away from the sleepy troopers.

He looked up to see Karl signaling the men, all fifteen of them, including Eric, to start moving forward silently and not waste time. Karl had divided his fifteen men into five groups to work together and focus their attention on only one or two horses for each thief. Eric was with Bo, a talk hulking Dane, and Arne, just a lad of 15.

"Now, remember," Karl muttered. "Just walk the horses quickly and quietly until you get behind the cliffside. Only then will you get on their backs and ride out as fast as you can. Simple."

"Right, boss."

"Simple enough."

"You three, Bo, Eric and Arne, take those four over there. Gorm and Halfdan, you go to those horses there." Karl assigned all the groups, and then they were ready.

They had no room for pity for the English who would be stranded here with their horses gone.

The thieves moved with stealth, checking the ground for any twigs that might crack under their feet and with care, making sure not to spook the horses.

Eric and his group crept to where four horses stood. The other Norsemen approached the other horses as well. The horses perked up and looked at them with curiosity.

"Hullo. We've brought some apples for you," Eric whispered, taking two apples from his bag. Four horses turned their heads toward the apples. He and Bo fed the horses equally while Arne untied the reins.

Things were going great. The hard part was getting out of there.

"Come along, horseys," Arne cooed, pulling them gently. "We'll take ye to a place where there be many more apples."

With Eric and Bo keeping the horses diverted with more apples, it was easy for Arne to get the horses to follow him. They had thought it would have been a bit difficult to do so, but they guessed luck was on their side.

"Quickly now," Eric crooned to the horses. "We don't want anyone to catch us, do we, horsey?"

They were very close to the edge of the meadow and were almost jogging with joy when a shout rang out.

"Thieves! They're taking the horses!"

Blast.

They picked up their pace, trying to make the horses walk faster. Karl stood in the middle of the road with two horses beside him, waving to hurry.

"Stop them!" Someone shouted.

The Norsemen stopped all efforts of being quiet.

"Go! Go!" Karl shouted. Those already nearing the cliff side leaped onto the horses' backs and galloped away.

But half of them were quickly surrounded by the English vermin who in no way hid their intense hatred of the Vikings.

"You good for nothing, heathen thieves! Give them back!" shouted one with a black shirt.

Eric turned to see two English men approach him, and their long poles pointed at him. How did they move so fast? Thank God, they didn't look like professional soldiers.

He quickly drew his spear from its sheath on his back.

"You've made your last mistake, Viking," growled the other warrior with the red band around his forehead. "Give back our horses, and we won't harm you."

Eric was not a warrior by trade. His service to King Guthrum was that of a commercial seaman, increasing the wealth of the Norsemen by sailing towards Iceland, Constantinople, and the Muslim Territories to buy and sell goods. But Eric always insisted he and his men trained hard on-board ship, keeping up their strength and fitness and learning all types and ways to defend themselves in battle.

He knew how to fight, and these two men didn't scare him. After all, what can wooden poles do to his long spear? As Bo said, kindling.

He looked behind him, noting that the other Norsemen were still struggling with their horses.

Arne was fighting a small English lad. He looked around for Bo. Where was Bo? There he was, fighting two English soldiers earnestly striking at him with their wooden poles.

He had to buy them some time.

"What horses? These horses?" He said, laughing snidely. "These are our horses! What do you want with our horses? I'm afraid it's you who's making a mistake, Sir!"

Black Shirt and Red Band attacked with shouts, hitting him with their poles. He made sure not to harm any of the English fighters severely. After all, they, the Norsemen, were the ones who were the criminals here. Eric knew the English thought the Norsemen were all brutes, but he wasn't a *total* brute.

With that thought, he went for the fighters' legs, trying to slow them down enough for his men to get away. By this time, a crowd from the hamlet had gathered, but intrigued to watch the fight at a safe distance. Some were shouting obscenities at the Vikings, rude vulgarities involving the characters of their mothers and their gods.

"You're never going to leave this place alive, heathen!" Black Shirt shouted.

Surprisingly, Black Shirt and Red Band fought well. Their skill surprised Eric because he had thought these two men were but mere farmers from English villages. They fought only with wooden poles. But they must have trained all their lives to learn how to fight and protect themselves from the Norsemen using wooden staves and farming tools, as the iron that sharpened most weapons was hard to find.

As he fought with his opponents, he watched as Arne and Bo were hit heavily by these wooden poles and that they now lay on the ground groaning. Several horses were still tied to the bushes and struggled to free themselves.

Annoyed, Eric began to fight with more passion. He had been willing to spare the English men, but apparently, they bore none of the same sentiment for him. He attacked brutally, swinging his spear with skill and drawing blood on their thighs and shoulders.

After delivering thrusts that forced Black Shirt and Red Band out of action, he looked for his companions. Bo's attackers were now on the ground, and Bo was moving towards Arne, but Eric saw he was injured.

"Bo! There're horses getting away!" He called out. "I'll take care of Arne!"

"Right, man! Give them all you've got!" Bo ran to the horses, clutching a shoulder.

Eric turned his attention to Arne, who was crouched on the ground and could barely hold up his spear against the small English man. 'Small English' knocked the spear out of Arne's hands using his staff, throwing the spear to his companion. Eric then realized that the English fighters had been seizing the Norseman's weapons and using them against them.

There were now only the two of them on the field, Eric and Arne. With Arne incapacitated and without a weapon, they would be easy to defeat. To think that earlier he had thought stealing the horses was going to be an easy job, now it looked like he had no choice but to watch as this small English man was going to beat young Arne to death, by the sound of things.

He ran to the two men fighting.

"Hey! 'Small English!'" he shouted, diverting the attention of the man away from Arne. "Don't you know there's no honor in fighting a downed enemy?"

'Small English' looked at him, a sneer showing even white teeth below his helmet.

"Oh, you're talking about honor now, Viking thief?" 'Small English' said, his voice hoarse but strangely soft.

"Let my man go, and I might just spare your life," Eric said, pointing his spear at the fighter.

'Small English' spat.

"Unlike me, who would stop at nothing until you're both dead! But trust me, if you don't leave right now and leave those four horses behind, I will make sure you die slowly and with excruciating pain."

The English fighter had his pole at the ready, and his anger now focused on Eric.

At this point, all Eric cared about was that Arne had to get away. He was only a young boy, after all.

"Git up." He said, gently nudging the young Norseman on the ground. "Quickly!" He said hurriedly.

"Are they going to kill us, Eric?" asked Arne.

"Not if I can help it."

Still watching the small English fighter staring at them, he helped the boy off the ground, ensuring he could stand on his two feet.

"Go get us horses." He said in a low voice and waited as Arne limped away.

'Small English' gave a slight snarl, and immediately snapped his staff on Eric's upper arm.

Eric retaliated by striking the Englishman powerfully on his unprotected side.

Yelling, Small English twirled his pole above him and whacked Eric on his leg, cracking his kneecap. Eric yelped in pain.

Though small, the English man's moves were elegant as they were fatal, and he fought with extreme fury in every strike. With movement as fluid as water, he danced his way around Eric, striking at him with precision, again and again.

Eric did all he could to dodge and strike without actually hurting the man. 'Small English' was good! Eric could have used his spear to do significant injury to 'Small English.' But something niggled at him, something about this slender man that didn't seem quite right. But anyhow, although skilled with spears and other weapons, Eric had never liked to hit people, much less men smaller than himself.

He could also see Arne at the corner of his eye, atop a horse holding the reins of a second one, nervously waiting for him.

It was time to go.

He made a feint to the left. And copying what 'Small English' did spun his spear above him and then slapped him powerfully on the side of the head with the wooden end.

'Small English' fell to the ground, looking dazed. His helmet hung askew around his head, making it impossible for him to see. Eric watched as the fighter made a futile attempt to stand again, groaning. Finally, the chap removed the helmet to see clearly, exposing a sweaty braid of flaxen hair that flopped out. He realized then what had been niggling at him.

Eric, shocked that the spirited warrior was a female, stared as she fought to get back on her feet.

The hamlet's people watching them "ooohed" and stood in awed astonishment, most mouths gaping wide open. Eric wasn't sure if it was because of the remarkable talents of 'Small English' with the wooden pole or because they were just as shocked as he was at seeing she was a girl.

"Cate!" He heard someone call out. "Catelyn! You! Viking! Get away from her, you brute!"

He turned and saw several Englishmen running towards them.

Without wasting another second, Eric twisted around, leaving the female soldier struggling to gain her balance as he ran to where Arne and the horses waited for him. Then, with one final look at the girl, men already helping her up, he jumped on his stolen horse and galloped away.

Chapter Two

Four Weeks After The Cursing, Summer 875, AD

Eric stood in the middle of the burnt forest, the smell of fire still strong in his nostrils. The wails and sobs resounded in Eric's ears. It was one thing to hear the Elven King condemn him to three years of this penance, but to be surrounded by the haze of suffering every single moment of every day was something else entirely.

From the moment he left the burned ruins of the Elven throne room seven days ago, he had begun to bear the full brunt of the Elven curse, hearing the languishing and weeping of the Elves as they mourned those who perished in the fire. And their sadness followed him everywhere.

"Samairenn!" He shouted savagely in his grief. "Heal them well! Heal them! For God's sake, heal them!"

The Elves had fled the forest, crippled by their unspeakable loss, and journeyed to their sacred healing land, Samairenn. Eric had no clue what kind of healing took place there, but it felt like the anguish and misery had not lessened since then. How was he to survive three years of this heartache?

"Samairenn," he sobbed. "Heal me, too. Samairenn! Me, me, too!"

He was never alone. He was utterly enshrouded in the Elven magic, joined to them, feeling all their emotions, feeling their anguish as memories of their loved ones dying assaulted them a thousand times each day.

He would hide in his rooms or flee to the forest where, with only the blackened trunks all around him, no one would hear his great heaving sobs.

He was, by all accounts, a prisoner. Days went by when he had nothing to do but think and feel.

He could also feel their hatred for him and their savage satisfaction that he was sharing everything they were feeling. For it was not only a forest he and his men had burned. They had burned an entire Elven kingdom; on his orders, they had unintentionally murdered almost an entire race.

Closing his eyes made it no easier, and the nights were the worst. Many elves remembered the fire in their dreams. And so also did he. Screams would pierce into him like sharp daggers, slowly carving away at his sanity, pulling him deeper into a pit of despair until there seemed no way out ever again.

That evening brought a welcome distraction. Agilberht Brosman, the English King Alfred's young scribe, arrived just before the *nattmal*, the night meal. He had ridden from King Alfred's estate in Wantage, a day's ride away by horse, with a request from the King.

King Alfred had begun pursuing peace talks with King Guthrum in recent days. As a result, Brosnan, or 'Gilly,' as he was called, was a constant guest at Eric's castle as Eric served as the intermediary between the two kings. No other Norseman spoke the complicated English language better than Eric.

'Gilly' was one of Eric's favorite English persons, and today, the scribe carried several scrolls of letters. After exclaiming over Eric's yellowing bruises, he relayed the message from King Alfred. The king's request to Eric was simple: Translate these letters into Danish and give them to King Guthrum. And then Gilly was to return to King Alfred's estate the following day.

But there was one significant complication. Seven days had passed since the Cursing, as Eric called the incident. Queen Ayarna had by then well and truly locked the castle and the grounds around it with the enchantment as she had promised, which meant people could enter, but no one except Eric could leave.

"My lord, what do you mean locked?" Agilberht asked, confusion on his face. "The small door beside the portcullis was wide open. It practically begged me to enter. I was going to warn you about that, my lord. Your security might be needing some upgrade. Being King Guthrum's known advisor, you surely would attract enemies."

Eric then explained that all castle inhabitants, except for himself, were locked in. He told him the story of the fire just days before and did not downplay his guilt in the tragedy.

Helga, Eric's housekeeper, came into the study with fresh rye bread rolls and butter and a mutton and carrot stew.

In disjointed English, she joined Eric in telling the story. "Master Brosnan, it is indeed so strange. No doubt, they felt it fitting to punish us, but the Queen of the Elves has given Lord Eric three years to -- not to break, but how you say -- to change the curse."

"Yes, yes, of course, Helga," Eric interrupted. He didn't want to get into the details of that part of the curse.

Helga gave him a sharp look and then turned to Gilly.

"Master Gilly, the castle is enchanted to lure people to come to the castle to keep us company! But no one can leave until the third spring from now!"

Agilberht thought this over and then turned teasing eyes to Helga.

"Oh, I would not mind at all staying for three years, Mistress Helga," he said with aplomb. "I shall grow fat with your delightful cooking."

Helga chuckled, blushing.

"The problem is --" Gilly's eyes went wide as he realized something. "Uh oh, my lords, I have instructions to return by tomorrow's eve at the latest. And if I don't return, King Alfred might think you have kept me prisoner!"

There was nothing to be done about that. Gilly simply could not return to King Alfred's estate. Sure enough, two days later, King Alfred sent soldiers to search for him. And what a challenge it was for Eric, Agilberht, and Eric's other servants to explain why they would not lift the castle gates to let the King's soldiers through and why Agilberht couldn't set foot outside the gate.

"Lord Eric Algar!" the King's commander had roared. "Open the gate in the name of the King, or we will begin an attack on the castle to rescue the King's scribe!"

"Threaten all you want," Eric roared back from the bulwarks. "That won't change a thing, you idiot! If we open the gates and you enter, you'll be trapped here just like Agilberht!"

"We need to get these stupid soldiers to calm down," Agilberht said, wringing his hands as they watched the King's men make preparations to shoot burning arrows

into the keep. "We need to get it into their thick heads before they burn us down or climb the walls. They look angry enough to kill us all, even me."

In the end, they gave up trying to explain the situation in a calm, peaceful manner. Gilly began screaming down from the wall, "I'm unharmed! I'm excellent! I am not a prisoner, but the castle is under enchantment!" He shouted and shrieked until his voice, already thin to start with, gave out ultimately.

When they finally managed to pacify the soldiers, Eric and Gilly went down from the ramparts and were able to talk to the commander without the risk of being shot down with arrows through the gate's latticed metal grille.

It was another three hours before Eric finally convinced them to set up camp against the palace walls next to the portcullis and not before Helga threw together a small feast with the help of her kitchen hands and sent it down in baskets to feed the soldiers.

Eric and Gilly returned to the study to write letters for King Alfred.

Eric promised King Alfred he would see King Guthrum as soon as he could make arrangements to make his castle more impregnable. It wasn't as if he was afraid of attacks, he wrote. He was troubled about the damned castle itself, luring and entrapping people.

They both handed the letters to the soldiers the next day, who, still grunting their suspicions about the enchantment, promised to get them to the King as soon as possible.

Eric's men, Sven and Bjorn, and his servants, Helga and Janica, began to plan ways to deter unwary travelers from finding the castle.

"You don't want your home to turn into an inn, do you, my lord?" Helga, the housekeeper said. Eric shook his head.

"I might have to build more beds in case this happens again, though," he said.

Sven suggested scaring off the strangers who came too close to the castle.

Bjorn nodded. "How do we do it?"

"We need a good strategy," Sven said.

Janica, who worked in the kitchen, grinned and said enthusiastically, "Hmm. If we make figures out of flour sacks, they will look like ghosts. I'm handy with a needle."

Bjorn laughed out loud and slapped his knee. "And," he said, "we can make noises that will sound like the dead."

The women began making ghost-like figures from rummage they would throw away anyway. And the men fashioned skulls, bones with cloth wrapping attached, and other bone-like objects from bits of wood and cloth. They made strange wooden puppets that looked eerily like skeletons and dead people. And Eric distributed them around the forest.

The men also created horns that caught the wind. From the mouths of these instruments, screams and moans filled the air in the forests, scaring travelers out of their wits. Both the 'ghosts' and the eerie sounds strengthened the rumors spreading that evil spirits haunted Berramburgh Forest.

And it worked! Travelers abandoned the road that ran closest to the castle. They instead traversed the longer route.

Chapter Three

Six Months Before Curse-End, Summer 878, AD

Fire.

A tree falling and blocking the path of a mother and her child.

The child falling into the flames.

Grief knifed at his heart, stabbing it with a physical pain. He gasped as a male Elf screamed. "Lilia! Lilia!"

He wished King Rhundael had just killed him instead and spared him this suffering.

He hurried down the winding staircase, his boots squeaking on the wood and stone. He smelled the castle's fresh scent of the polish Helga used for the banister. He heard the rustle of wind in the leaves, as he strode along the balcony. The sweetness of the air wafted up from the gardens below. Why were his senses so alive? Was it because he was nearing his death?

The stone balustrade was cold and smooth under his palm. Every day, he felt it as he walked past the railing, knowing his sense of touch was fading, knowing he was already losing the sensitivity, the flexibility of his fingers. He marveled at the perfect, unblemished texture of the stone. He would soon be one like it, as granite. And when the hardness would reach his heart, then it was time for him to die.

He knew it by heart -- his curse, the manner with which he would end his days. It was the worst kind of punishment.

He growled in frustration as he nearly stumbled down the stone steps that would lead to the gate. He already felt the stiffness in his legs. Six more months, and he would die as the Elven King desired.

But he would not think upon his misfortunes, the ill-luck that was entirely his doing.

He climbed the cart holding the produce from both his fields, inside his castle walls and the one beyond them. He snapped the reins, and the horses jumped forward.

Eric mulled over his discussion with King Guthrum just the week before. After the English had defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Edington, King Alfred had sent his terms to the Peace Treaty he was now demanding. This time, Guthrum was interested. Because Eric was the most skilled at speaking English and King Guthrum did not want to appear too interested, he sent Eric to hear King Alfred's words.

The English King was, right now, waiting for him at the Royal Berramburgh Inn. And so that was where he was going today.

But on the way, he would use the opportunity to cart the last of his harvest to the village grocer.

Creaking and squeaking, the wheels rolled down the valley and up the hill. Before the city gates, guards stood armed with spears.

“State your business,” the head guard barked.

Eric was irritated with their reaction. He had been coming into the village for years, yet they stopped him every time. He understood their added rudeness was because their King was in the city, and they needed to be more cautious, but their constant boorishness was beginning to grate on his nerves.

“Eric Algar. I’m here to sell my harvest and have a message from King Guthrum to King Alfred. I believe the King is waiting for me.”

“Why do you have your face covered?” the guard demanded gruffly.

Eric shrugged. “I stared at a woman with serpents in her hair, and she turned my face to stone,” he said, using a story he had heard during a sea journey to Constantinople years ago. “You would not wish to look upon my face.”

He pulled out his pass from the English King himself, and the guard perused it, looking up at Eric’s covered face nervously.

After a few moments staring at the roll of parchment, obviously trying to decide whether or not to insist Eric remove his face cover, the guard waved him through. Several other guards eyed Eric with the full force of their hostility.

Eric ignored them and led his horses into the village.

“Heathen beast, filthy dog,” he heard a guard mutter and spit noisily on the dry ground.

Eric moved on. He ground his teeth holding back his anger. How would a peace treaty ever succeed?

He headed to the grocer with whom he dealt regularly. He had chosen to deal with this man because he was honest. The aging man could no longer till the soil on his land, so he bought produce from surrounding farms and sold them at the markets. His daughters would always be at his market stall. Eric brought his crop to him in exchange for seeds, hatchlings, young animals, and a portion of his profits.

Eric walked to the hut and knocked on the door with his knuckles.

“Master Aiken.” He called leisurely and cricked his neck to ease the tight, aching muscles there.

There was no response.

“Master Aiken, I’m here with your produce.” Eric said.

He waited for a response and then banged harder. “Old man.”

Eric growled. He hated having his plans disrupted. He didn’t want to have to leave and return later. He banged again.

“Master Aiken!” He shouted.

Eric was about to bang on the door again when a fair young maiden pulled it open. Eric was taken aback by her beauty. Though her face was smeared with grime and soot, she had beguiling eyes and her nose was perfectly sized. Tendrils of brown hair framed her tired face. Eric’s eyes scanned her from head to toe.

Eric lowered his voice.

“Good day,” He greeted.

She gave a tiny smile and ducked her head.

“Good day,” she said with a mouse-like squeak.

“I seek Master Aiken. I’ve brought the produce.” Eric said.

“Thank you.” She said, still looking at the ground. “My father is down by the river. Did you want to wait for him?”

Eric wished she would look at him. “Err, no. I have an appointment at the Inn. Will you open the barn door for me, and I’ll leave the produce for your father?”

She nodded and slinked off, her head bent. Eric followed her. She raised the crossbar, and Eric said, "I've never seen you here before."

"Papa doesn't let me work with my sisters or go to town, so I can take care of the cooking and keeping the house."

"It is a shame a beautiful thing such as yourself has to be kept hidden," Eric said. Her ears turned pink and she gasped as though scalded. She took a few steps backward.

"You're Viking," she said, twiddling a lock of her brown hair nervously.

He shrugged. "Yes. Are you afraid of me?"

She looked up at him as if the answer to his question would be determined by whatever she saw on his face. But he kept his face covered by his cowl. She looked down again, studying the hem of her dirty gown.

"A little. But you're kind. I know who you are. You're not like the others, and my father respects you. Your produce gives him more customers."

Her constant staring at the ground was starting to bore Eric.

"I love your horses. They look beautiful." She said.

Eric smiled. Maybe he'd get used to her shyness. She was tender and sweet. She seemed like an honest girl, one with whom he could make a home.

On impulse, he uncovered his face.

"May I know your name, Mistress?"

The girl took one look at his face, gasped, and ran back to the house, squeaking.

Eric sighed. How can a flame be kindled? How can love grow when he can't even spark friendship?

He opened the barn doors and carted in the sacks and baskets of produce. The old man Aiken was honest to a fault. He knew the old grocer would settle with him the next time he came around.

As with Aiken's beautiful daughter, Eric knew his cursed face had scared her forever and that she was not the woman Queen Ayarna had in mind. He got back onto his cart.

What had the Queen been thinking, he thought for the thousandth time as he guided the horses toward the center of town. And the Queen thought she gave him reprieve from the curse. How was that better than the King's punishment? It was as though the Queen had tormented him with a trick. Was she laughing at him now?

"If a woman would love you with a true devotion, her love will alter the curse," was what Queen Ayarna declared. But who would love a monster such as he?

In his visits to King Guthrum's court before the Cursing -- for he had been the Norse King's envoy to many lands, trading Norse precious stones, tools, weapons, and craft -- he had met many women, even bedded them several times, and he knew they were well pleased.

But after the Cursing, it all changed. There was a time after that, remembering all the women, he nursed the hope that one of them would be the one to free him from the curse.

But all had shunned him. In the early months of the curse, he had hoped his features would not change, but a chance look at a shined wine goblet had shown him that, alas, a stony surface had started growing on his face. And it was not even a shiny, pretty sheen. It was like that of stone in a dirty pond for years, now covered with light moss and barnacle. Ugh.

Even his near-betrothed, the Lady Vencena, the daughter of another of Guthrum's commanders, had fainted dead away when he dared touch her hand with his cold hands.

He had not spoken to her again since then. He didn't have time for fainting women.

However, there was a time when his strange ugliness had attracted a beautiful woman -- Grisell, King Guthrum's niece and ward. He chuckled at the memory.

One night, not too long ago, he visited King Guthrum's castle in East Anglia, bringing coin from the other Viking commanders and their taxes to the King. It was twilight when he arrived. King Guthrum's steward informed him that the King had gone on a short journey to meet other battle commanders, and he would return surely by first light. The steward asked the King's ward, Grisell, to escort him to his chambers as the esteemed guest he was.

He had never hidden his growing hideousness from his own people. And by that time, most of the Norse population had gotten used to his looks. Grisell was one of them who seemed to accept him for his stony countenance and scaly skin.

The lady gave a sweet smile and said, "Right this way, my lord Eric."

She had walked in front of him, and Eric hadn't been able to resist watching the exaggerated sway of her hips meant for his eyes. She brought him to his chambers, and she lingered.

"I hope you find the accommodations to your liking, my lord." She drawled.

He nodded. "Yes, Lady Gris --"

She brought a finger to his lips, cutting him short. Her eyes sparkled with mischief and a fire that seemed to consume him.

"Make no mistake, Eric Algar." She held his gaze and caressed his lips with her soft finger. "I am no lady."

She trailed a hand down his chest, slowly past his abdomen, below his waist, and stopped there -- and fondled.

He gasped at her ministrations that roused and ignited his need.

"Bar the door, Eric Algar, and I'll take care of this for you," she whispered.

Eric's need for relief overwhelmed him, and he did what he was told.

She rode him like a beast, drawing his pleasure till he was faint. No woman had ever exhausted him like she had that night. He had lain sated and pulled her close to him, wrapping her in a warm embrace. If she loved him, he couldn't imagine how pleasurable their nights be. He would be a happy man. Maybe with many sons.

"Grisell," he sighed. "You are one unique woman."

She grinned up at him. "The only woman like me you will ever meet. I will make all your dreams come true."

Eric saw his only dream flash before his eyes -- being free from the curse and having Grisell as a wife, and many sons and daughters, settled in his castle. Eric smiled at her. The end of his curse seemed more attainable by the second. He leaned and kissed her. He marveled that his cursed condition, his cold stony skin, his scaly body had not repulsed her.

"Tell me about you," Eric said.

She lay on her side and fondled his sex again, leaving Eric bemused.

"I would rather have you shouting my name than telling stories. Trust me; you will enjoy it more."

Without any prelude, she mounted him again.

“I’ve watched you from afar, Eric. I’ve always wanted to know how the stone man would feel inside of me,” she moaned. “I’m going to ride you like a bull.”

Although it was the most sexually satisfying night of his life so far, a feeling of disappointment and shame swept over Eric. She had wanted him because he was a freak, not because of tender feelings for him.

Indeed, the next night when she knocked on his door, he had kept the door barred shut.

Despite all that, he was thankful for Grisell. She had shown Eric he wanted love, not simply physical pleasure, and not only because it would alter the curse. He wanted a woman in his life he could love. Someone who also loved him truly in return. Not because he was a freak of a ‘stone man,’ but because he was Eric Algar.

What he yearned for was the lady Queen Ayarna wanted for him.

But he had a feeling he would never find her.

He walked with vital purpose towards the inn where the King of England awaited.

At least, if Guthrum and Alfred needed him to promote this Peace Treaty, then so be it. At least he would die happy knowing he had done well for his countrymen and England.

Chapter Four

Three Months Before Curse-End, Autumn 878, AD

Catelyn Hastings picked out a nail from the pocket of her tools apron and fiercely hammered it into the slate. Her hair had spilled out of her three-stranded plait, causing wisps of chestnut locks to plaster down the sides of her sweaty face.

She was glad Papa was not home to see her in this current state of mind, but at the same time, she was worried for him. Her father, Robert Hastings, Baron of Ermington, had said he'd be away for a fortnight. The good King Alfred had honored him with an invitation to lend his expert mediation skills at the Peace Treaty Summit.

The King had his capital in Wessex. But he was now at his Wantage estate hosting a complicated Summit with the Norse leader, King Guthrum. Both kings hoped this Summit would yield peace between the people of England and the invaders from the Norse lands.

It was not the first time King Alfred called her father to attend as his mediator. Indeed, she heard the King once pronounce that he wouldn't dare sit at a negotiation table without the Baron present.

But it was now twenty days since Papa had left. Would a summit extend past its scheduled closing?

Cate imagined them, King Alfred and her father seated at a long negotiation table and several English lords on one side and Norse leaders on the other.

They could be agreeing on the treaty conditions with everyone cheerfully signing pieces of important-looking scrolls of parchment. Or they could be arguing and shouting curses up and down the table.

Would they agree on who would be King over England? Would they divide the kingdom for the sake of peace?

Most of England welcomed a conclusion to this seemingly unending war with the Vikings. But a handful of English nobles considered the King's Peace Treaty a treasonous move, and Cate's betrothed, Hugh Johnson was one of them.

Cate had once been at a local assembly organized by her father to discuss the details of the Treaty. Hugh had challenged her father.

"Lord Hastings," Hugh had said as he stepped forward, his whole countenance one of hostility. "I can't believe you're considering this." Loud voices expressed their agreement or disagreement. Clearly, the proposed Peace Treaty was causing more division than goodwill amongst the English.

"The people will turn against the King and against you, Lord Baron! I expected you to be a leader who would punish the Vikings for every attack they've made against England! I, for one, will certainly fight tooth and nail against any peace with our Viking foes!"

Papa had just stared at Hugh with a weary expression. When he spoke, Cate was reminded of how he talked to her as a sulky 10-year-old.

"Believe it or not, Hugh," he said quietly, "King Alfred has most of the nobles on his side. And last I heard, more and more Viking commanders are willing to trade their battleaxes for farming tools. People are tired of fighting. We all just want peace."

She saw Hugh shake his head in disgust as he tore his gaze from the Baron and glanced at her. She had known what was going on in his mind. He had told her many times before he would never agree to a peace with the Viking heathens who had ravaged the country's coastlines for decades.

There were just too many things to worry about. And that was why Cate was on the roof, repairing shingles. Bang. Bang. Bang.

What could go wrong at the Summit? Well, for one, there could be an unexpected raid from people – either English or Viking (or even both) -- not wanting the peace treaty to exist.

Second, disagreements could erupt into violent brawls among men from both sides, warriors all of them, who could rip each other apart with their bare hands. Thirdly, betrayals could lead to an assassination – while some of them sat calmly enough, one man could easily pull out a dagger to slit the throat of the King. Or her father.

The thoughts had made Cate feel sick to her stomach since the Baron left.

And even if the Summit was a success, there was still her father's journey home. King Alfred's Wantage estate was three days' ride away, and her father was not getting any younger. Anything could happen on the way, even though he had half a dozen soldiers at his back. Bang, bang, bang. Another nail. Bang, bang, bang.

She was in a difficult mood, and not only because of her father's delayed return. There was something more, something niggling at her.

Maybe it was the fact that the weather had set its mind to celebrating the end of the Fall season with a scorching spell. And now, past midday, she was sweltering, immensely regretting her decision to be on the roof.

Or maybe it was Hugh.

More and more frequently, most of her worrying thoughts were Hugh-related. It was highly frustrating. The more she tried not to worry about Hugh, the more she worried about Hugh.

What was even more confounding was that he insisted he was worried about her and that they needed to marry soon because of his worry.

Bang. Bang. Bang. The hammer managed to drown out his voice for a few seconds till she had to pick up another nail.

"Catelyn, where are you? Can you hear me? Cate?" His voice floated up from the ground.

Catelyn heaved a huge sigh. Hugh had awoken from his nap after their mid-day meal.

How can I not? She wanted to say.

"Of course, my Lord," she said instead.

"Ah, there you are. Well, what do you have to say to what I've been telling you?"

That what you're suggesting is utterly ridiculous.

Her fingers found the last nail in her tools belt and hammered it into the slate. Hugh's voice sounded nearer.

"Why do I perceive you're ignoring me, Catelyn?"

She paused before the final strike. "I would not do anything of the sort, my lord." She replied and struck the nail firmly. She thrust the hammer back into her belt, made her way down the ladder, and stood before him.

"Hugh, you have no reason to be worried about me. I am perfectly alright," she said, hoping for an end to the conversation. It was slowly making her weary.

Hugh huffed as though she was ignorant.

"Silly wench," he said under his breath in that frustrated kind of way that Cate glimpsed more and more recently.

She raised a brow.

Silly wench?

Catelyn Hastings had not been called *silly wench* in her life, not once, not ever. She simply was not the silly wench type. She was a soldier. Albeit a woman, but a soldier, nonetheless. She had fought in skirmishes alongside her father and his captains, and yes, even beside Hugh. And now he called her a silly wench.

"Cate, you continue to chase Vikings, which you have done all your adult life. When will you stop and leave the fighting to me? You need to settle down. Become a homemaker. Soon, you shall be too old to bear my children," he said, "my sons."

For a moment, Catelyn thought him presumptuous for believing she would bear his children. But she admitted she was the presumptuous one for thinking that she would not. Her thoughts were the strange ones, not Hugh's.

They had been betrothed to marry for close to five years now. Marriage was inevitable. And children? The only natural consequence of their future marriage was that they be fruitful and have as many children as she could give him.

The thought petrified Cate. All of a sudden, it was hard to breathe.

Hugh stepped closer, and Catelyn craned her neck to look up at him. A few years ago, looking at him straight in the face was an impossible act without her blushing. Hugh Johnson was a handsome man, tall, with eyes the village girls swore had to be crafted from enchanted brown gemstones.

However, she now felt nothing as she looked at him; she was as dead as a doornail, as her father would say.

He placed his hand on her shoulder and said, "Leave the Vikings to me, Cate. You need to be happy in a home. I can make you happy."

"What do you know about making me happy?" She could not stop herself from asking. She knew it was rude of her to show him how little he knew what made her laugh or cry or scream inside.

Hugh's eyes widened, and Catelyn wished she had kept her thoughts in her head rather than spew them out – a bad trait her housekeeper, Martha, had always told her would get her in trouble someday.

He chuckled.

"I know you, Catelyn Hastings."

Did he really? How could he when she didn't know herself?

For as long as she could remember, she had taken on the role of her father's son, following him in battles against the Vikings -- first as a squire, and then when she was old enough to wield a broad sword, had sworn to fight those barbaric heathens who walked their land.

But now, the King and even her father were working towards peace with the barbarians. Who was she now when there was no war to fight? Was being a wife and mother the only identity left for her to take?

"What if I wanted to wait another year before getting wed?" She asked.

Hugh sputtered and then laughed, seemingly overcome with mirth at the thought that she was in no hurry to marry him.

She kept mute and stared at him.

"Cate, you're being absurd. Listen, you will love the peace and stability of becoming my wife. I will come back as soon as your father returns to discuss how soon we can marry. But if I had my way, we would be wed in a week, even in the absence of your father," he said, ending with a wink.

"I just can't wait to marry you, Catelyn," he said. "I love you. We shall marry soon. I promise," He said, assuring her as though it was she begging to hasten forward the date of their wedded bliss. He kissed her forehead.

He turned and left without any farewell. Catelyn suddenly felt Hugh was more fond of the idea of being wed to her than he was fond of her. She watched him mount his white steed in a fluid motion.

"Godspeed," she called out of politeness and courtesy than love.

He gave her a careless nod and charged away.

Chapter Five

Catelyn felt relief that he was gone. She returned the pack of nails and hammer to their shelf in the stable and walked to her horse.

The horse whinnied at the sight of her, and she smiled her first genuine smile since Hugh had come calling. She rubbed the horse's muzzle and leaned her forehead against him.

"Tell me what to do, Aelle. Why do I want to run away?" She whispered, desperate.

The mare said nothing. Not even a neigh.

She sighed and petted Aelle before walking out. As much as she wanted a ride, it would be too hot for it. A quiet walk was what she needed. She picked up her cloak from a bale of hay, grabbed a pie and a skin of ale from Martha's kitchen, and walked towards the hill behind the manor.

Her mother had loved the wildflowers that returned year after year on the hill. And even now, at autumn's end, the summer flowers were still there, waving in the soft breeze. Her father used to come to the hill with her mother to admire the scenery, but he had stopped coming since her mother's death.

She made the walk about a mile east and up the green hill still puckered with flowers enjoying the uncharacteristic summer-like weather. Cate grinned with delight at the sight -- yellow dandelion, pink and purple campion, the white daisies, and thinning yarrow amidst the green grass bowed and bent in the wind. Very soon, they would all disappear as winter approached.

She reached the colossal walnut tree on top of the hill and lifted her face, enjoying the sight of its golden leaves falling around her. Catelyn found shade from the sun's piercing heat behind its short, stocky trunk.

She leaned against the tree and stared into the azure and white sky in the distance. She played with fallen nuts, her mind returning to the happier moments she had had under this tree when her mother was alive.

From nowhere, the raspy voice of the physician resounded in her head.

I am afraid, my lord, the baroness is no more.

Her mother had died when she was only a little girl, yet fresh pain launched a ball of tears into her throat. For the thousandth time, she wished she could think of her mother without feeling this way. But she wondered if that may be even worse, to think of her mother without the grief.

But oh, how Cate needed her mother in times like this! Maybe she'd be able to unburden her soul, to tell her how torn she felt. Her mother would advise what to do, perhaps even assure her that every woman felt this way, this apprehension and doubt of a marriage.

She sighed and hugged her knees. But it couldn't be. Her cousin Edith had wedded a young nobleman in East Anglia. She had been pleased and excited, not brooding about future children like what Cate was doing. Edith's had been a love

match.

Maybe that was the problem. Did Cate love Hugh? And did love even matter? Her parents had met on their wedding day but learned to deeply love each other. And her cousin had repeatedly droned on and on about how much she loved her new husband.

She had to marry Hugh, didn't she? She was promised to him after all. He was the most eligible man in their part of King Alfred's kingdom. Yet, a part of her wanted to break that promise. It felt like there were two warring camps in her head. One offered propriety and certainty, and the other craved for something she had never tasted.

But how could one hunger for something one did not yet know?

In her head was a voice reminding her of how privileged she was. She wasn't raised in a dreary way like most girls. Her father, unconventionally, had thought her the equal of the sons his wife never bore him, and he determined that no offspring of his would ever be called weak, whether male or female. He had taught her to read and write, and ride and fight. She had the freedom other girls her age could only dream of.

And Martha, God bless her, told her she was lucky that a man like Hugh would even want to marry her. For how many other men would want to marry a woman who walked around in breeches and go to war? That should make her grateful, shouldn't it?

People had said she was brave and that with Hugh, she could build a formidable partnership that would fight against the Vikings. They said she and Hugh would be a force to deal with, whatever that meant.

That idea drove and motivated her for so long, and so she encouraged Hugh's advances. And when his marriage proposal came, the vision of them purging the Norsemen from their land was all she aimed for.

Now he was talking about Cate being a mother to his children, and the thought of that terrified her. For so long, she had always equated marriage to Hugh with a means to defeating the Vikings, their marriage for the good of East Anglia.

Her future felt hollow and meaningless if he took the Vikings away from her life's goal.

And hollow and meaningless was not her intention for her life.

But the most important thing was, what did she want? Not for the country, not for the people, not because Martha said so – but for herself. What did *she* want?

The wind was getting cooler now. Cate snuggled under her cloak and ate her pie.

Chapter Six

Mornings saw the Hastings manor civil and organized. Even before the sun was up, the staff went about their early morning duties. Typically, Martha always followed a strict schedule, and began by snuffing out the lamps and candles. Brother Chad, the resident monk who doubled as the Baron's steward, usually had a quiet dawn service in the little chapel beside the manor house. He held the service for the servants and tenants who insisted on starting the day with prayers. The cooks lit the cooking fires and began breakfast. And Edmund, the stable master, and his boys would feed and clean the horses, livestock, and poultry.

But not this particular morning. Not when Lord Hastings' stallion, Thorn, returned without him, thunderously galloping in through the gates as though chased by hellhounds.

The young soldier tasked to keep the manor safe while the Baron was away, Captain John Baldlice, was greatly alarmed and hastily alerted his squad of men to be up and ready for the lady's instructions. He and Edmund calmed the horse and checked to see if the beast carried something that could give them a clue as to what might have happened.

Finding nothing, he reported the incident to Martha, who raced to awaken the lady of the manor.

"Lady Catelyn! Lady Catelyn!" She shouted as she barged into the lady's chambers, throwing the door against the wall.

The bang roused Catelyn from a disturbing dream containing Hugh.

Catelyn groaned. "Martha, what is it?"

"My lady, his Lordship's horse has returned. But the Baron is missing!"

Catelyn's irritation vanished. She instantly sat up, all dregs of her dream thankfully vanishing like smoke.

"Missing?"

Catelyn shot out of bed. She snatched her robe, pulled it around her shift, and raced out of the room. Martha chased after her, shouting, "My lady, you can't go out dressed like that!"

Cate ignored her and dashed into the courtyard. Dismay bloomed in her heart at the sight of Thorn, her father's speckled horse, snorting and blowing. A stable hand was cooling the stallion by pouring a bucket of water over his back. Steam was rising from his flanks, a sign he had run a great distance with little or no rest.

"My lady!" Edmund greeted, trying to get the horse to drink from a bucket. "He's overheated and ready to collapse!" Cate knew Thorn could sustain significant internal injury without urgent care and die.

She nodded.

"Then do everything you can to save him," she said, her composed manner belying her dread. "We want him alive and well when my father returns."

Cate took a deep breath, trying to think of a reasonable explanation for the horse returning without her father. Every possible cause she could think of was worse than the first.

"Captain John, get some breakfast into you and your men, and then set out to every inn. Speak to every traveler, and ask if they have seen the Baron. Everyone else, meet me in the kitchen when Thorn is out of danger. Martha, have Cook prepare a hefty breakfast for all, will you, please. I want everyone to be alert and ready for anything starting this instant."

Then she went up to her rooms and got dressed, all the while trying to stop dismay from overwhelming her.

"D'ye think it was Vikings who done took him?" Edmund, her father's stable master, asked two hours later as they conversed over porridge, biscuits, and cheese. Catelyn imagined Viking berserkers torturing her father and shivered.

"I doubt it, Edmund. Thorn is a prized stallion. Those barbarians would have taken him for themselves if they had captured Papa."

"Perhaps he had an accident and fell off the horse?" Martha suggested with concern etched into every line on her face.

Catelyn shook her head.

"Martha, Papa is no child or simpleton with the horse. He is a proficient rider." She simply refused to agree to anything they were saying. "He always took caution when riding."

"Do you think he was ambushed by bandits, then?" Martha spoke yet again. Her forehead had puckered in her anxiety for her master.

Cate felt a rising terror.

"Oh, Martha," she said, her voice shaking with uncertainty. "He would never be caught unaware by bandits or other dangers because he has six soldiers with him, does he not?"

Martha fell silent, but Cate could see that her housekeeper was trying not to show she was terrified, just like herself. She thought of how her father always had breakfast with his soldiers when they were out on the road. He was not one to set himself apart from his soldiers and servants. That's why he was well-loved. She had a feeling his faithful knights would protect him with their lives, sacrificing even theirs to ensure his safety.

But something had happened because, well, Thorn was here, and where was the Baron? She stood up and began to pace, her biscuits and cheese forgotten on her plate.

She knew she would have to accept all or one of those possible explanations at some point because, in all honesty, no one knew what was true or not. Any of what they hinted at could have happened.

"Maybe we go an' send out other ones an' search yonder inns. Maybe the Good Lord done sent 'im a good Samaritan to help 'im." Edmund said.

"Samaritan, Edmund. Know your scripture." Martha scolded.

"It is Samaritan, too, Mistress Mart'a," Edmund protested. "Why, 'twas Samaria the good man came from. True, Brother Chad?"

The shy monk nodded his head, his mouth full of food.

"Enough." Catelyn sighed, exasperated with their bickering. Martha and Edmund did so love to argue.

"My father could be hurt somewhere. This is no time for arguments about scripture." She said and paced again. Her mind was whirring.

Something was wrong, and Cate felt it in her bones. Her Papa was in trouble, but only the Lord knew what kind.

Boot steps pounded the stone floors outside the reception room, and Captain John stormed in and bowed.

"Lady Catelyn," he greeted.

"Captain John," she exclaimed, eager for some good news. "You only just left us. Why have you returned so soon? Did you find my Papa?" She asked in one breath.

"I am afraid not. But we have a clue," John said and raised her father's cloak.

Chapter Seven

Catelyn gasped and reached out to receive her father's tattered traveling cloak.

"Where did you find this?" She asked.

"At the first inn I walked into, the Three Roosters, worn by a traveler who claimed he found it on the road near the forests of Berramburgh."

"Goodness gracious," Martha gasped as she crossed herself. "That's the enchanted forest!"

"Exactly!" Captain John said meaningfully, nodding his head repeatedly.

"But, but..., those stories aren't true, are they?" Catelyn looked doubtfully at her father's Captain.

"Too many stories can't all be wrong, my lady." Martha had begun twisting a biscuit into crumbs in front of her as she moaned. "There are ghosts in that forest spiriting people away! Your father is, indeed, lost! Ohh! My lady, whatever shall we do? Why a farmer's wife had spread the tale a year past that her son had left home with a cartload of crops for King Alfred's castle in Wantage. You know, my lady – the way to King Alfred's castle is to ride past Berramburgh. And she said her son never returned!"

"It's true, Lady Cate." Edmund chimed in in his countryside dialect. "I did hear it, rumors, of course, that people who done disappeared weren't ever seen again! No, never!"

Catelyn bit her lip and considered them, really troubled now. She had heard these frightening tales herself. Stories of people disappearing without a trace while traveling the road near that forest of Berramburgh. That's why people now call it the Cursed Woods.

She took a deep, panicky breath.

"Could that have happened, Captain? Do you think ghosts spirited Papa away to who-knows-where? Might Papa and his six soldiers now be in some otherworldly dimension where they cannot find their way back home? If that was what happened, how can we even start to find them?"

Try as she might, she could no longer hide her distress.

"Uh-hem, Lady Catelyn. Might I speak?" Brother Chad said cautiously.

Catelyn turned to the elderly monk who handled her father's finances and accounts. She knew Brother Chad to be excessively thoughtful about essential matters. She also knew him to be right about most things.

Catelyn nodded, grateful for the interruption. "Of course, you might, Brother Chad. You know I value your thoughts always."

He bowed his head. "For that, I am deeply humbled, my lady. And it is my thought, as we rule out options, that perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to panic or even consider these superstitious talk too seriously." The religious man paused and glanced at Martha and Edmund.

"Please, go on, Brother Chad." Cate encouraged.

"I did hear some years ago from the monks up in the north that a peaceable Viking lord had settled in some farmlands near that forest. Perhaps we should consider the more, er, plausible option that this Viking settler has found your father."

"Monk, do not speak of such things. A Viking berserker finding the Baron is even a more terrifying situation." Martha fretted. "Most likely, they would have decapitated him and --"

Captain John chimed in. "Brother Chad is right, my lady. And Mistress Martha, if indeed it's a choice between going after some ghosts or knocking on the door of some Viking farmer to enquire if he's seen the Baron, I'd choose to knock on the Viking's door any day."

"But that is just my point, Captain!" Martha quavered. "Do you think any Viking would have simply waved the Baron on his way if they had crossed paths? You know what those Vikings do to us English!" At which point she started wailing again. "Oh, my Lord Baron. We shall miss you so!"

"Oh, hush! Everyone! Let me think!" Catelyn demanded.

"Lady Catelyn," Martha sniffled. "We'll never find him."

That did it. That word 'never.' The Baron had always instilled in Cate the belief that she could do anything, however complex. The word "no" or "never" never failed to drive her onward to the next step. She could almost hear Papa's voice booming across the table. *Always look on the bright side, my dear. And always fix your eyes on the solution, never the problem.*

Her decision then became crystal clear.

"We *will* find him, Martha! If I am my father's daughter," Catelyn vowed, "I am going to find Papa! If ghosts have spirited him away, I will find the truth about that. If that Viking, farmer or not, had captured him, how much worse would that be than if ghosts indeed took him?"

And if Papa were dead, well, she would deal with that too.

"But my lady, what will you do? You can't go after 'is lordship.'" Edmund exclaimed.

"Why not?"

"My lady, have you not heard our speaking? No one ever returns from that cursed forest! And what about the Viking?" Martha squealed.

"You would rather the Baron become lost to us without knowing what happened? You think I can live the rest of my life sniveling like a girl?" Catelyn raised her voice, exasperated.

"No, my lady." Martha and Edmund chorused. Captain John stared at Cate as though she had grown snakes about her head.

"Lady Catelyn," Martha tried again. "If it was the Viking who took His Lordship – my lady, he is a berserker! A Viking enemy! We fear what he would do to you, to your virtue." Martha said. "Perhaps we need to send for Lord Hugh and ask for his counsel."

Hugh? In truth, she had forgotten all about Hugh since he left yesterday. Was it only yesterday? It felt a lifetime ago after all that had happened in just these past few hours. And now, reminded of him, she had a clear feeling not to involve Hugh at all. Even if Hugh did indeed love her, she knew he had no love for her father. She was sure of that, at least. Hugh might even try to hinder her at every turn and would just get in the way.

No, she would heed her intuition and search for her father without involving Lord Hugh Johnson. Besides, if she searched for the Baron without him, well then when she came back home – *if* she came back home, that is – things might look different between them too.

With that choice made, Cate felt a strange lifting of weight she didn't know she was under, a burden she had to be free of before stepping into this expedition into the unknown.

"Martha is right, my lady," the Captain said. "The Vikings are known for their brutality. Now, we don't know if this berserker has taken the Baron, but if he did, then perhaps if Lord Hugh will come with us, and you stay and prepare for your wedding –" Captain John began.

Catelyn put up a shaking index finger to stop him.

"No, John!" Catelyn said, horrified by his suggestion. She stared at them one by one. Was this how her faithful servants saw her? As something to be protected and pampered, someone to continue her father's legacy by staying home while the men risk their lives? A useless daughter who wouldn't even try to find out what happened to her own father?

She pressed her finger to the table to stress her point.

"I will not wed until we retrieve my father from the hands of either ghosts or berserkers. If I perish in our mission, and my father is dead, my cousin Edgar will become Baron. Martha, you will send a messenger right after the meal and ask that Edgar and my aunt come here today to await our return."

"Yes, my lady."

"Brother Chad, how much gold do you think it will take to convince the Viking to return my father to me?" She asked.

The monk mused. "Perhaps a hundred gold pieces."

Catelyn nodded. "Prepare two hundred. We have the gold, do we not? I will not have the Viking man refuse me. After all, any Viking would appreciate a ransom, true? They enjoy reaping where they have not sown, do they not?"

Martha said quietly, "Lady Cate, what if he won't accept the gold?"

Catelyn steeled her back, "Then I will sneak into his castle and rescue my father."

All hell broke loose. Edmund threw up his hands, and the Captain began shouting, "No! No! No!" Martha raised her apron to her face and wailed into it. Then she turned to Brother Chad.

"Now look what you've done, you stupid monk!" She hissed.

Brother Chad nervously kissed his prayer beads.

"Lady Catelyn, listen to reason," Captain John said, "My men and I can handle this further search and even negotiate the Viking's ransom if it comes to that. This is too risky for a woman --"

He stopped himself, and Catelyn glared at him.

"Do you think me weak?" She said in a dangerously quiet voice. "Is that it?"

He shook his head and stammered.

"No, my lady. But we don't even know where the castle is; we don't know its layout, we don't know how many guards there are – we can't even speak their language."

Catelyn's frustration kindled in her eyes.

"John, I am not without skills," she said boldly. "I have trained with yew bows and swords since I was perhaps 10-years-old. I do think I have a mind that can

follow clues to find a missing man. And when you were just a squire for Papa, he took me to my first battle against the Vikings, where I – why, that was when I rescued Brother Chad, was it not?”

“Indeed it was, my lady,” the monk said. “And what a rescue it was! You would have been proud of her, Captain John! She was like an avenging angel!”

“Brother Chad!” Martha exclaimed. “Stop encouraging her!”

Catelyn realized that much of Martha's behavior was a ruse to make Cate afraid to leave the manor and look for her father. It irked her to be manipulated by her own housekeeper, but she also knew that Martha was only worried for her.

She had to put a stop to this nonsense.

“In case you don’t realize it, if my father is still alive but absent, I am the Baron, and my word is the law. I will repeat myself only this once. If my father needs rescuing, I will go after him myself. Nothing and no one can convince me otherwise.” She said, looking at everyone in the room, making sure they understood her.

“Martha, ready for me a valise, if you please. Brother Chad, have two thousand gold pieces ready by nightfall. Edmund, prepare the carriage and Papa’s best coach horses. And Captain John, you will come with me.”

Captain John clicked his heels.

“My father once said that men often disappeared for weeks after being captured by bandits or if they fell off their horse. But winter is coming, and if we don’t search for him now,” her voice cracked with emotion, “and who knows, he may be lying somewhere with a broken bone -- if we delay, the snow will cover any tracks left behind by anyone who might have taken him away. Or if he’s hurt, he could freeze to death.”

“In that case, Baron, I will go with you as well.” Brother Chad said, all hesitancy gone. Edmund turned to stare at him, his eyes almost bugging out of their sockets.

“Well, I, I,” Chad stammered. “If the Baron is hurt, he will need me to tend to his injuries, will he not?”

Edmund turned sharply to Cate.

“And I, my lady,” he said, touching his cap. “You will need ‘elp wit’ the ‘orses.”

“And I,” quavered Martha. “You would need ... someone to tend to you, my lady.”

“Martha,” Cate said in a warning voice. “You will stay and –”

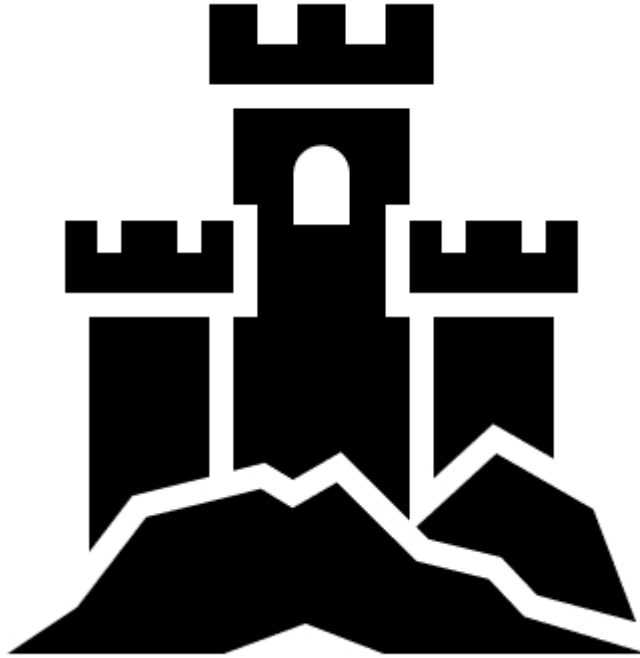
“No, my lady,” Martha said, wringing her hands. “I will come with you.”

Cate took a deep breath. “So be it. We will leave tomorrow at first light.”

- The End -

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About This Author



Avani Clare has always imagined countless ways fairy tales could have happened and ended. She now combines her love for romance, fairy tales, and history in her stories, producing suspenseful plotlines and exciting characters.

Avani lives in Brisbane with her husband, six children, a vegetable garden, and a cat.

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